

RELIGION AND LINCOLN

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A recent book about Lincoln was entitled *The Lincoln Enigma*. Perhaps no other aspect of Lincoln may be more accurately referred to as an enigma than his views on religion and its influence on him. As William Miller points out, there is even a book that claims Lincoln had a “Jewish” spirit;¹ Mark Noll notes that Lincoln “never joined a church and ... read only a little theology.”² Yet, to draw from this the conclusion that religion mattered little to Lincoln and bore no real influence on him would be far from accurate.

So how does one analyze how religion impacted a man who never joined a church and who never publicly gave a precise account of his own beliefs? In stark contrast to President George W. Bush who, when asked which historical figure influenced him most, said Jesus Christ, Lincoln himself avoided bringing his personal religious beliefs into the public eye as he thought they should be considered irrelevant to his politics.³

Still, a person’s beliefs are mirrored in his actions far more than in mere words, and in the category of the former, Lincoln provided countless examples that the discerning historian and student of politics or even of theology can use to ascertain how religion influenced the man whom most experts agree was America’s greatest President.

Thus it is that by looking at Lincoln’s life through the prism of religion, and through analyses of his actions in a theological context and what they reveal about religion’s impact on him, this paper will attempt to give its reader a survey portrait of religion’s influence on our nation’s greatest President.

This paper is not an exploration of Lincoln’s views on the more general role that religion should play in democratic self-government, nor is it an examination of Lincoln’s use of Biblical references, nor is it an examination of Lincoln’s dealings with different religious groups, nor is it an exploration of Lincoln’s idea of “political religion”; though

aspects of some of these will be discussed in terms of the overall influence of religion on Lincoln's life, it is a concise exploration of the influence of religion on Lincoln in a broad context that will remain the focus of this paper .

Lincoln's father, described by Noll as a "hardshell Baptist layman,"⁴ had helped build a local church when Lincoln was young.⁵ In stark contrast to his father's direct connections with his denomination of Christianity, Lincoln could be described in his youth as a skeptic and was never directly tied to any one branch of a religion. When one realizes that Lincoln grew up during the Second Great Awakening—an age of religious revival and of fiery traveling preachers—in the area most directly affected by this movement, this is all the more startling. His parents and sister all underwent adult baptism (Baptists did not believe in infant baptism) in Kentucky; yet, when they moved to Illinois, 17-year-old Lincoln sought no such membership, though he was more than old enough to have received it. In Illinois, he took a fancy to readings that attacked the self-righteousness of the religious movements, such as Paine's *Age of Reason* and de Volney's *Ruins of Civilizations*,⁶ and was never drawn toward "the militant and dogmatic Calvinism"⁷ of those around him. As Miller states, "... he was not sitting there in the pew absorbing what he learned with heartfelt agreement."⁸ In fact, in the words of Donald, Lincoln "turn[ed] away from the emotional excesses of frontier evangelism,"⁹ subscribing to belief in a greater being but reluctant to choose one faith or sect's conceptualization of this being. Barton even goes further and says that young Lincoln "revolted" against the "interpretation of God and of human life" that was presented to him by the religious leaders, practices, and thoughts that were common in his day.¹⁰

One of the earliest theological principles he espoused was a general trust that a well-meaning Being had a plan for the world and was guiding all, but that this plan was difficult if not impossible to ascertain. He called this principle the “Doctrine of Necessity,” his belief that “the human mind is impelled to action, or held in rest by some power, over which the mind itself has no control.”¹¹ The core of this belief, though it seems he later refined it to accept the general Christian God, would stay with him all through his life. Donald chose to open his entire work with a single quote, on its own page, that came from Lincoln the year before his death: “I claim not to have controlled events, but confess plainly that events have controlled me.”¹² What is seen both here and in the “Doctrine of Necessity” is a humble submission to some sort of divine will. Perhaps this does not seem altogether remarkable or that different from the strict Calvinist belief of predetermination. Yet its tone is as far from this as possible,¹³ and that is where Lincoln, taken in the context of his contemporaries, shines brightest. Lincoln, ever the ambitious, ideologically-driven politician, was clearly much more comfortable and confident in his ability to ascertain what his country’s path should be than in determining and proclaiming the will of God; thus his political confidence and ambition on the one hand were balanced by his religious humility on the other, and they coexisted peacefully within him.

From temperance to abolition to daily sermons, Lincoln lived in an age of self-righteousness, intolerance, and remarkable ease with which both laity and clergy in America claimed to have both authoritative divinations of God’s will as well as keen insight as to who was, and was not, in God’s favor, leading them to pass swift and severe judgment on those with whom they disagreed. As Dewitt notes, “He lived in a day when

excesses of emotional evangelism and doctrinal extravagances were commonplaces of preaching and frontier religious literature.”¹⁴ These excesses of the Great Awakening period turned Lincoln away from all organized religion as it existed in America and formed the core of some of his most admired traits. Seeing his contemporaries’ absolute certainty of the correctness of their own moral high ground, he would discuss his own side’s culpability and peppered his speeches and remarks with a homely self-deprecating humor. “From Lincoln’s fatalism derived some of his most lovable traits: his compassion, his tolerance, his willingness to overlook mistakes.”¹⁵ His distinct brand of “fatalism,” as discussed earlier, was a humble one, and it kept him from being so self-righteous that he could not understand or have sympathy for those who disagreed with him; rather, his ability to do just that would be one of his hallmark traits, contributing to his famous pragmatism.¹⁶ In an age of passion, Lincoln’s “fatalism” helped to build a pragmatism that allowed him to calmly sit back and look at a situation with a clear and level head, letting his mind, not his passions, bring him to his decisions when passions drove those around him to rash excess

Yet Lincoln, ever the moderate, chose not to scoff and dismiss religion. Edgar DeWitt Jones perhaps best summed it up when he wrote “If it is easy to make Lincoln out to be a skeptic, it is easier to prove him a staunch believer and a Christian in all save actual church membership.”¹⁷ When he was attacked during his congressional campaign of 1846 for his religious “infidelity,” he responded by saying, “That I am not a member of any Christian Church, is true; but I have never denied the truth of the Scriptures; and I have never spoken with intentional disrespect of religion in general, or of any denomination of Christians in particular.” He continues to say that the “Doctrine of

Necessity” was, in fact, in his understanding, “the same opinion to be held by several of the Christian denominations.” He finished his letter to the *Illinois Gazette* by saying:

I do not think I could myself, be brought to support a man for office, whom I knew to be an open enemy of, and scoffer at, religion.—Leaving the higher matter of eternal consequences, between him and his maker, [in other words, not passing moral judgment on the man] I still do not think any man has the right thus to insult the feelings, and injure the morals, of the community in which he may live.—If, then, I was guilty of such conduct, I should blame no man who should condemn me for it; but I do blame those, whoever they may be, who falsely put such a charge in circulation against me.¹⁸

Lincoln, then, while harboring no love for any particular sect of Christianity and never becoming a member of any one church, clearly had a deep respect for religion. He would often read the Bible when growing up on the prairie, would be able to mention biblical quotes at the drop of a hat, and found that the Bible was “the best cure for the “Blues” could one but take it according to the truth,” and professed to “read it regularly.”¹⁹ Without the Bible, he said, “we could not know right from wrong.”²⁰ It was not the God of a sect or a preacher he accepted, but the God of the Bible. Lincoln had a deep and profound respect for the mysteries of life; his speeches are full of references to some mighty, unstoppable, difficult if not impossible to discern divine will, and the Bible further bolstered Lincoln’s primitive “Doctrine of Necessity” from his youth. As Edgar DeWitt Jones writes, “The place of the Bible in Lincoln’s education is conceded by all who have written about him,” and cites his ample use of Biblical references as being “interwoven into the fabric of his fifty-six years.”²¹ Miller’s assessment is particularly insightful:

In any case, Lincoln as an adult not only affirmed the central *moral* importance of the Bible to his own understanding, but showed its moral importance in practice. But he did so as a man in conversation with the Bible, making up his own mind.

Noll informs his readers that this was not as uncommon as one may suspect, for many growing up on the frontier had an intense spirituality and sense of religion while shunning away from committing to any one particular sect. It was not God they rejected, but human self-righteous interpretations of His will and how to honor Him. Noll too sees the influence of the bitter infighting among various sects as turning Lincoln away from Church membership, sees the deaths of so many relatives and friends at difficult times of Lincoln's life, starting with his mother as a young boy and up to his own son Willie in 1862, as drawing him closer to a deeper awareness of "the mysteries of God and the universe."²²

Clearly Lincoln was a somewhat unorthodox skeptic, but he still had a respect for a "Higher Power" that, perhaps not early in life but in his middle and later life, came closer to the God the Father of Abraham and of Moses and Jesus. So, if at a simple level, anyway, we can characterize Lincoln in such a way, the question still remains: how did his unique understanding of God distinguish and shape Lincoln?

The answer is that Lincoln's unique understanding gave him a unique—and uniquely appropriate—approach to the problems of his day.

The first thing to notice in Lincoln's unique religion is his unwillingness to proclaim that he knew the will of God. A group of Chicago Christians writing to Lincoln to urge emancipation, claiming their moral authority from knowing the will of God, was met with the somewhat humorous reply "It is my earnest desire to know the will of Providence in this matter. *And if I can learn what it is I will do it!*" In one of the few examples in which Lincoln made a strong, but still relatively reserved claim into understanding the will of God, he says before the battle of Antietam that "he made a vow,

a covenant, that if God gave us the victory in the approaching battle, he would consider it an indication of Divine will, and that it was his duty to move forward in the cause of emancipation.”²³ This was one of the few times Lincoln ever did anything like this, in contrast to the other prominent public figures of his day, North and South, who “made no bones about saying [that they knew the will of God].”²⁴

Things looked especially bleak at this point for the Northern war effort, and, his son Willie having recently died as well, Lincoln was turning to God, the Christian God almost certainly now, in a way he had probably never done before. Barton, Noll, and Donald, among others, all agree that during 1862, Lincoln had a personal turning point in his religious life. He had always subscribed to belief in a Divine Being, a Higher Power, at least the Deist God of Jefferson’s *Declaration of Independence*, but when faced with such dire times, he looked for a more concrete, more tangible, more compassionate God, and while he still did not join a Church in an official sense, he did frequent the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church at this time, engaging in many conversations with the reverend there. Lincoln himself called this period a “process of crystallization” of his religious beliefs.²⁵ Dewitt calls this period the “flowering of his personal faith,”²⁶ and notes that “[e]vidence of Mr. Lincoln’s religious faith piles up particularly in the war years.”²⁷ As Allen C. Guelzo writes, “By midlife, Lincoln had tempered some of his early religious skepticism.”²⁸

One could say his beliefs after this period became more sophisticated, as Lincoln’s understanding of God actually underwent a change in this period, and theology figures more prominently in his public and private life. Miller notes that “he does seem either to have held all along or to have come to during the terrible pressure of the war—

perhaps more strongly after his son Willie's death in 1862—a belief in the God that Bible-believers believe in.”²⁹ Noll states:

Like a figure from Israel's ancient history, Lincoln was arguing with God. But it was no longer a domesticated deity, an American God, but the ruler of nations. The truth had begun to dawn on Lincoln that this God was not at the nation's beck and call, but the nation at his. His thinking was beginning to diverge from the paths followed by...the overwhelming majority of his contemporaries.³⁰

Even before this time, Lincoln had told several close confidants, as interviewed by his old law partner, Herndon, that he did not believe in Hell, but, rather, that all men were destined one day for salvation. As Miller poses the question that was on Lincoln's mind, “What sort of God would that be, who would in his omniscience and foreknowledge create all those souls whose destiny was to roast forever in the flames of hell?”³¹ Lincoln saw a forgiving God, and in turn he displayed remarkable forgiveness and magnanimity in his life. This new view of God was also more respectful, more uncertain. Before, Lincoln had fallen into the trap, though to a remarkably lesser degree than most of his contemporaries, of seeing America as God's chosen land, full of his favor. Noll confirms this, citing Lincoln's First Inaugural Address to show that “he talked of divine realities as if their main purpose was a utilitarian one to serve the nation,” that “[h]e even spoke as if God existed as a kind of celestial umpire waiting only to dignify the decisions of U.S. citizens.”³² But the failures of the Union Army and the death of his son Willie made him question that America, or even the North, had this favored status.³³ This would culminate in an idea of shared responsibility for the war, most visible in his Second Inaugural:

Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces, but let us judge not, that we be not judged. The prayers of both could not be answered. That of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes. "Woe unto the world because of offenses; for it must needs be that offenses come, but woe to that man by whom the offense cometh." If we shall suppose that American slavery is one of those offenses which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but which, having continued through His appointed time, He now wills to remove, and that He gives to both North and South

this terrible war as the woe due to those by whom the offense came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a living God always ascribe to Him? Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said "the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether."³⁴

Here can clearly be seen Lincoln's understanding of the war as having two sides, and while he shows he himself cannot understand slavery, he asks his fellow Northerners not to pass judgment, suggesting shared blame and that the war may be divine punishment. He never says that this was the exact will of God, but suggests only that it *may* be. As Miller points out, "Lincoln did not make his moral affirmations by grand authoritative proclamation, as from on high, speaking on behalf of God."³⁵ In contrast, as Wills, Noll and Miller note, his contemporaries had no problem doing so. In an era where both sides spewed angry invectives of damnation against each other and claimed for themselves an exclusive moral high ground, Lincoln talks about forgiveness and the possibility of his own side's culpability. For Wills, "Lincoln was the exception in that his goals and rhetoric did *not* escalate" with the escalation of the war, and it is this that he calls "Lincoln's distinctive mark, one almost unique in the history of war leadership... his refusal to indulge in triumphalism, righteousness, or vilification of the foe."³⁶ Noll more or less says the same thing: "Abraham Lincoln's refusal to claim the moral high ground exclusively for the North was even more extraordinary than his charity to a nearly defeated foe,"³⁷ adding that

none of America's respected religious leaders—as defined by contemporaries or later scholars—mustered the theological power so economically expressed in Lincoln's Second Inaugural. None probed so profoundly the ways of God or the response of the humans to the divine constitution of the world. None penetrated as deeply into the nature of providence. And none described the fate of humanity before God with the humility or the sagacity of the president.

Given his background as a skeptic and a non-church member, for Lincoln to so grandly surpass the theologians of his day is extraordinary. These striking differences stemmed from his unique understanding of religion, of a more forgiving world where all could be saved, that God's will was "mysterious, not manifest,"³⁸ and these are all in a sense a part of his homespun "Doctrine of Necessity" that grew out of his "revolt" against the way religion operated in his time and place. These views of his on religion made him who he was, gave him his defining characteristics by which he is most remembered. Never accepting the extreme, judgmental Christianity of American Evangelical Protestantism, he nevertheless examined the Bible deeply and took in its greatest teachings, those of forgiveness, and striving to do your own personal best while not condemning others for their faults. When North and South used religion as means to destroy each other, Lincoln brought in religion for its true purpose, to unite and heal:

With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.³⁹

Though possibly not a Christian himself, Lincoln displayed more of a Christian spirit than any of his contemporary theologians. Clearly, both what Lincoln liked and did not like about religion contributed significantly to the shaping of his core beliefs and traits; his views on human nature, arising from both that which he rejected and accepted, helped build the traits that made Lincoln, made him truly great, and made him, in a sense, a religious prophet (he never would have called himself that) unequalled in his time or arguably ever in American history. As Jones concludes, "With the passing years, the limitations of Abraham Lincoln's religious views, which were intellectual and technical,

will grow less and less apparent, while the great basic principles of the Christian faith which found such large expression in his daily life, will grow from more to more until they quite transfigure him, if indeed they have not already done that.”⁴⁰

ENDNOTES

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- ¹ Miller, William Lee. *Lincoln's Virtues*. New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 2002. 19
- ² Noll, Mark. *America's God: from Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002. 426
- ³ Morel, Lucas. *Lincoln's Sacred Effort*. New York: Lexington Books, 2000. 89
- ⁴ Noll *America's God* 428
- ⁵ Miller 12
- ⁶ Donald, David Herbert. *Lincoln*. New York: Touchstone, 1995. 49
- ⁷ Barton, William E. *The Life of Abraham Lincoln*. Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company Publishers, 1925. 2: 459
- ⁸ Miller 42-43
- ⁹ Donald 15
- ¹⁰ Barton 2:459
- ¹¹ Donald 15
- ¹² *Ibid.* 9
- ¹³ Noll *America's God* 426-434
- ¹⁴ Jones, Edgar DeWitt. *Lincoln and the Preachers*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1948. 135
- ¹⁵ Donald 15
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁷ Jones 135
- ¹⁸ Lincoln, Abraham. *Letter to the Editor of the Illinois Gazette, August 11th, 1846*, qtd. In Basler, Roy P. *Abraham Lincoln, his Writings and Speeches*. Cleaveland, Da Capo Press, 2001. 187-188 Bracket insertion is my own.
- ¹⁹ Lincoln, Abraham. *Letter to Miss Mary Speed September 27th, 1841* qtd. In Basler 123
- ²⁰ Miller 8
- ²¹ Jones 135

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- ²² Noll, Mark *The Puzzling Faith of Abraham Lincoln*. *Christianity Today*, Vol. XI, No. 1, 10.
- ²³ Donald 374
- ²⁴ Noll *The Puzzling Faith of Abraham Lincoln* 1
- ²⁵ Donald 337
- ²⁶ Jones 135
- ²⁷ *Ibid.* 139
- ²⁸ Guelzo, Allen C. *Lincoln and the Abolitionists*. *The Wilson Quarterly*, Vol. 24 Issue 4, 64
- ²⁹ Miller 89
- ³⁰ Noll *The Puzzling Faith of Abraham Lincoln* 3
- ³¹ Miller 88
- ³² Noll *America's God* 430-431
- ³³ *Ibid.*
- ³⁴ Abraham Lincoln, *Second Inaugural Address*, qtd. in Basler 793
- ³⁵ Miller 294
- ³⁶ Wills, Gary. *Lincoln at Gettysburg*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995. 183
- ³⁷ Noll *America's God* 428
- ³⁸ Will, 184
- ³⁹ Abraham Lincoln, *Second Inaugural Address*, qtd. in Basler 793
- ⁴⁰ Jones 143

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